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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN 000035

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MTS AND EAP/C

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [CH](#) [BX](#)

SUBJECT: CHINA TAKES DEFENSE CHARM CAMPAIGN TO BRUNEI

REF: A. WWW.BT.COM.BN/EN/HOME_NEWS/2008/01/16 AND 17

[1](#)B. 07 BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN 160

Classified By: DCM Justin Friedman, reasons, 1.4 (b) & (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Chinese Defense Minister, General Cao Guanchuan, led the latest detachment from China's charm offensive to Brunei for an official visit January 14-16. While no new agreements or business deals were announced during the three day visit, the General scored points with Brunei officials for taking a warmer, less doctrinaire approach to his meetings. Cao Guanchuan's visit is the latest in a regular series of visits from senior Chinese officials which seem to be focused less on immediate results, than on raising China's profile and building relationships in Brunei. END SUMMARY.

Reciprocal Visit

[1](#)2. (SBU) Chinese Defense Minister and Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, General Cao Guanchuan, paid an official visit to Brunei as a follow on to the visit of Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah (who is also Defense Minister of Brunei) to China in October 2005. General Cao paid a call on the Sultan, as well as on Deputy Defense Minister Pehin Yasmin Umar. Cao visited Royal Brunei Air Force Headquarters, calling on Air Force Chief, Brigadier General Dato Mahmud Saidin. From his praise of the Air Force's maintenance facilities to a perfectly pitched press interview (ref A), Cao waged a successful charm offensive focused more on building bilateral ties than on any concrete mil-to-mil activities.

Bruneians Appreciative

[1](#)3. (C) The Bruneians welcomed the change of tone from previous high-level mil-mil contacts. Pehin Yasmin and General Mahmud (separately) told us that were impressed by Cao's knowledge and openness on military organizational issues and capabilities. They remarked to us what a difference that is from several years ago, when the Chinese military was stiff and doctrinaire.

[1](#)4. (C) Mahmud told us that no sales of equipment were discussed, but he did note that China had sold air-defence systems to Indonesia, a capability Brunei is planning to upgrade. Cao told the press that more Chinese firms planned

to participate in next year's BRIDEX exhibition, Brunei's bi-annual defense trade show (see ref B for info on BRIDEX 2007).

Tough Issues in Background

15. (C) Our contacts told us that potentially contentious political issues, such as Brunei and China's conflicting South China Sea sovereignty claims were not raised by either side during this visit. The only policy point Cao went out of his way to make to the Bruneians, in private as well as with the media, was that Taiwan reunification was a core issue for the PRC, one on which it could not compromise.

COMMENT: Pure Charm

16. (C) General Cao has left Brunei without any concrete achievements on record. Although pitched as a follow up to a Brunei visit to China, Cao's visit is better understood in the context of a regular series of visits to Brunei by senior Chinese officials -- ministers, deputy ministers, and senior Party functionaries -- over at least the past two years. On this visit, the Bruneians were clearly flattered by the attention, but we don't expect these or other recent visits to prompt a sea-change in Brunei's strategic calculus. Brunei exists as a sovereign state today because of its proven skills, tested over 500 years, of triangulating among major powers. A medium term Chinese charm offensive is not going to change this, but over time, it will position China to be a stronger strategic competitor in the region.

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